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SUBJECT: BUSAN NOT AS FAR FROM NORTH KOREA AS YOU MAY THINK

¶1. (U) This message is from the American Presence Post (APP) in Busan, Korea.

¶2. (U) SUMMARY: Despite an apparent lack of attention to North Korean issues, the port city of Busan is home to several key players in the expansive realm of North Korean issues. While Busan is home to one of the leading academic commentators on North Korea, there are few academic programs available to students here. The NGO group that started the medical clinic in the Kaesong Industrial Complex was founded in Busan and originally staffed exclusively by volunteer doctors from the founding city. A candidate for the National Assembly in Busan received national media attention as he based his platform on human rights in North Korea and greater efforts to secure the release of abductees being held in the North. However, the print media in Busan lacks credibility and insight into North Korea leaving interested citizens looking to Seoul periodicals as their primary source of information on the topic. END SUMMARY.

ACADEMIA

¶3. (U) Secondary education in Busan remains a vibrant industry that continues to grow to meet the demand of Busan residents. There are 12 four-year universities in the city, one of which, Pusan National University, was formerly regarded as the top university in the country. Despite the thriving academic community in Busan, no school has a North Korean studies department. (It is worth noting that there are only a few of these programs even in Seoul. The top North Korea program is at Kyungnam University whose main campus is in the southeastern province with the same name, but the school of North Korean studies is actually located in Seoul.)

¶4. (U) There are a handful of professors in Busan that consider themselves North Korean experts. The leading North Korean professor in Busan is actually an American, Brian Myers, who made a name for himself as an expert on North Korean propaganda. Myers taught for several years at Korea University, one of the top three in Korea, but made the move to Dongseo University where he had the opportunity to be a dean at the International Studies department, a position that he says would never be offered to a foreign professor in Seoul.

¶5. (U) Myers told us that he finds it challenging to maintain his "edge" as a North Korean expert while being separated from the mainstream of this issue that remains in Seoul. Myers has to travel back to Seoul several times per month where he pores over KCNA (the DPRK's official media outlet) articles and other North Korean periodicals that are collected by the Ministry of Unification's Information Center on North Korea in Seoul. In addition to the lack of research facilities related to North Korea, Myers said that all of the symposiums and conferences are held in Seoul which also limits Busan's students and professors who may be interested in North Korean issues. For now, Myers said it was very unlikely that any of the schools in Busan would find a reason to launch a North

Korea program and most schools will be satisfied to offer a handful of North Korea-related classes.

NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

¶6. (U) For those in Busan who choose to donate their time and talents to help North Koreans, proximity to the DMZ or to Pyongyang is not a driving factor. Green Doctor is an NGO that an eye doctor in Busan named Cheong Gun started. Dr. Cheong, like many who are eager to assist North Korean residents, is motivated by his religion and his desire to help those in need. Cheong began to make a significant impact in North Korea when he opened a medical clinic inside the Kaesong Industrial Complex in 2006. The clinic is small by any standard, only measuring 360 square meters. There are three full-time South Korean doctors stationed at the clinic, each specializing in a different area. The clinic is open to any of the North Korean workers employed at the KIC and is considered better than most medical care facilities available elsewhere in North Korea. To date, the clinic has treated over 60,000 workers in its short period of operation. Dr. Cheong said it was tough going at the outset because the North Koreans were suspicious about the group due to its English name and suspected ties to the U.S. The turning point came when the Vice Mayor of Kaesong was overcome by fumes and was rushed to the clinic to receive oxygen treatment, not available anywhere else in Kaesong. The Vice Mayor was cared for and the clinic had proved its value to the DPRK leadership.

¶7. (U) In addition to originally providing all of the volunteer doctors to staff the KIC clinic, Busan is also responsible for a sizable portion of the financial contributions needed to fund the clinic and other efforts in North Korea. Dr. Cheong estimated that 80 percent of the funding for his group came directly from Busan residents. (Note: The Ministry of Unification also contributes USD 40,000 per year to the Green Doctor organization in support of the clinic. End Note). Cheong said that he has received USD 3 million in pharmaceutical donations from local drug companies. Green Doctor relies heavily on financial donations from Christian churches and Buddhist temples but also receives smaller amounts from private citizens. For his next effort, Cheong plans to open a 150-bed hospital in Kaesong City where he could serve common citizens in addition to KIC workers. To make this dream a reality, Dr. Cheong will once again look to the people of Busan for support. He is confident they will respond.

POLITICS

¶8. (U) As surprising at it may sound, one Busan native started a run at a National Assembly seat primarily on a North Korea platform. Do Hee-yoon is the president of the Citizen's Coalition for Human Rights of Abductees and North Korean Refugees, or CHNK for short. CHNK is a loose coalition of 25 groups, most of which have a religious orientation. Do grew up in Busan in the relatively undeveloped and poor Kangseo district. In the run up to the April 9 parliamentary elections, Do said the GNP asked him to prepare to run for the seat in his district if the incumbent, Chung Hyung-keun, was not able to run. In the end, it was decided that Chung would be the GNP candidate in the district but not before Do had launched his campaign and made news as a "North-Korean activist" who was running for office.

¶9. (U) Do explained that his platform was based around the need for the National Assembly to do more to secure the release of abducted South Koreans who are being held in North Korea. The majority of abductees that the South claims are being held by the North are fishermen who were captured after wandering into DPRK waters. Do claims that about one third of these abductees are from Busan thereby making this issue important to the people here.

¶10. (U) Another connection between Do's district and North Korea is the increasing number of North Korean defectors who are being resettled there. Mostly due to the large number of inexpensive apartments in the district, Do said that approximately half of the 600 defectors who live in Busan reside in his district. Although there are a host of services available to defectors living in the Seoul vicinity, Do lamented that there is less support in Busan and

he hopes to change that if he is able to one day claim a seat in the National Assembly.

MEDIA

¶11. (U) If you were to only look at the print media in Busan as an indicator of interest in North Korean affairs, you might draw the conclusion that Busan is more than 392 miles away from Pyongyang. Busan Ilbo's International News Editor, Lim Sung-won, told us that North Korean issues are just as relevant and applicable to the residents of Busan as they are to the residents of Seoul. Lim's claim is upheld when you compare the North Korean editorials appearing in the Busan Ilbo to those in the Chosun Ilbo, the leading daily in Seoul. Although the frequency of North Korean editorials is generally the same in the two papers, Busan Ilbo focuses on specific events while the Chosun focuses more on overall policy debate. It is clear in talking with ordinary citizens in Busan that the Busan Ilbo is not considered as a serious source for North Korean news. For those who are interested in more than local issues, many choose to subscribe to one of the larger papers based in Seoul such as the Chosun Ilbo or the Joong-Ang Ilbo.

COMMENT

¶12. (U) There are almost an endless number of facets to North Korean issues. Ranging from human rights to nuclear proliferation to concern for fellow Korean "brothers", every South Korean who is interested can find a North Korean issue to take to heart. It is not surprising to find several groups and individuals who are making significant contributions to better understanding of North Korea in Busan, South Korea's second largest city. That said, the North Korea policy brain trust is not likely to ever shift into the outlying areas as the flow of students and professors continues toward Seoul. The people of Busan appear to be content with providing in-kind service and financial contributions while leaving the heavy academic lifting to Seoul.